

## **The question of race in the USA**

### **1. The enduring plight of African-Americans**

#### **a) Facts**

Poverty is still too common in the U.S. In 1968, 25 million Americans — roughly 13 percent of the population — lived below poverty level. In 2016, 43.1 million – or more than 12.7% – did.

Today's black poverty rate of 21% is almost three times that of whites. Compared to the 1968 rate of 32%, there's not been a huge improvement.

Financial security, too, still differs dramatically by race. In 2018 black households earned \$57.30 for every \$100 in income earned by white families. And for every \$100 in white family wealth, black families held just \$5.04.

Another troubling aspect about black social progress – or the lack thereof – is how many black families are headed by single women. In the 1960s, unmarried women were the main breadwinners for 20% of households. In recent years, the percentage has risen as high as 72%.

This is important, but not because of some outmoded sexist ideal of the family. In the U.S., as across the Americas, there's a powerful connection between poverty and female-headed households.

Black Americans today are also more dependent on government aid than they were in 1968. About 40% of African-Americans are poor enough to qualify for welfare, housing assistance and other government programs that offer modest support to families living under the poverty line.

That's higher than any other U.S. racial group. Just 21% of Latinos, 18% Asian-Americans and 17% of whites are on welfare.

There are, of course, positive trends. Today, far more African-Americans graduate from college – 38 percent – than they did 50 years ago.

Our incomes are also way up. Black adults experienced a more significant income increase from 1980 to 2016 – from \$28,667 to \$39,490 – than any other U.S. demographic group. This, in part, is why there's now a significant black middle class.

Legally, African-Americans may live in any community they want – and from Beverly Hills to the Upper East Side, they can and do.

#### **b) Causes**

Some prominent thinkers – including the award-winning writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and “The New Jim Crow” author Michelle Alexander – put the onus on institutional racism. Coates argues, among other things, that racism has so held back African-Americans throughout history that we deserve reparations, resurfacing a claim with a long history in black activism.

Alexander, for her part, has famously said that racial profiling and the mass incarceration of African-Americans are just modern-day forms of the legal, institutionalized racism that once ruled across the American South.

More conservative thinkers may hold black people solely accountable for their problems. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson is in this “personal responsibility” camp, along with public intellectuals like Thomas Sowell and Larry Elder.

(Source : Extracts from an article by Sharon Austin, published in The Conversation – Nov 6, 2024)

### **2. The fight against discrimination**

#### **a) the BLM movement**

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a decentralized political and social movement that aims to

highlight racism, discrimination, and racial inequality experienced by black people and to promote anti-racism. Its primary concerns are police brutality and racially motivated violence against black people. The movement began in response to the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Rekia Boyd, among others. BLM and its related organizations typically advocate for various policy changes related to black liberation and criminal justice reform. While there are specific organizations that label themselves "Black Lives Matter", such as the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, the overall movement is a decentralized network with no formal hierarchy. As of 2021, there are about 40 chapters in the United States and Canada. The slogan "Black Lives Matter" itself has not been trademarked by any group.

In 2013, activists and friends Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi originated the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin. Black Lives Matter became nationally recognized for street demonstrations following the 2014 deaths of two more African Americans, Michael Brown—resulting in protests and unrest in Ferguson, Missouri—and Eric Garner in New York City. Since the Ferguson protests, participants in the movement have demonstrated against the deaths of numerous other African Americans by police actions or while in police custody. In the summer of 2015, Black Lives Matter activists became involved in the 2016 United States presidential election.

The movement gained international attention during global protests in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. An estimated 15 to 26 million people participated in Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, making it one of the largest protest movements in the country's history. Despite being characterized by opponents as violent, the overwhelming majority of BLM demonstrations have been peaceful.

The popularity of Black Lives Matter has shifted over time, largely due to changing perceptions among white Americans. In 2020, 67% of adults in the United States expressed support for the movement, declining to 51% of U.S. adults in 2023. Support among people of color has, however, held strong, with 81% of African Americans, 61% of Hispanics and 63% of Asian Americans expressing support for Black Lives Matter as of 2023.

(Source : Wikipedia – 6 Nov. 2024)

## **b) The end of Affirmative Action in the USA**

In the United States, affirmative action consists of government-mandated, government-approved, and voluntary private **programs granting special consideration to groups considered or classified as historically excluded, specifically racial minorities and women**. These programs tend to focus on access to education and employment in order to redress the disadvantages associated with past and present discrimination. Another goal of affirmative action policies is to ensure that public institutions, such as universities, hospitals, and police forces, are more representative of the populations they serve.

As of 2024, affirmative action rhetoric has been increasingly replaced by emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion and nine states explicitly ban its use in the employment process. **The Supreme Court in 2023 explicitly rejected race-based affirmative action in college admissions in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard***. The Court held that affirmative action programs "lack sufficiently focused and measurable objectives warranting the use of race, unavoidably employ race in a negative manner, involve racial stereotyping, and lack meaningful end points. We have never permitted admissions programs to work in that way, and we will not do so today".

These practices had started in **1961** when President John F. Kennedy in 1961 issued **Executive Order 10925**, which required government contractors to take "affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin." Affirmative action then evolved into a complex system of group preferences which would face many legal challenges. Affirmative action included the use of

racial quotas until **the Supreme Court ruled that quotas were unconstitutional in 1978.**

Affirmative action currently tends to emphasize not specific quotas but rather "targeted goals" to address past discrimination in a particular institution or in broader society through "good-faith efforts ... to identify, select, and train potentially qualified minorities and women."

(Source : *Wikipedia* – 25/11/24)

### **c) diversity training for police officers or companies**

Outrage over racial profiling and the killing of African Americans by police officers and vigilantes in recent years helped give rise to the Black Lives Matter movement.

But tensions between the police and black communities are nothing new.

There are many precedents to the Ferguson, Missouri protests that ushered in the Black Lives Matter movement. Those protests erupted in 2014 after a police officer shot unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown; the officer was subsequently not indicted.

The precedents include the Los Angeles riots that broke out after the 1992 acquittal of police officers for beating Rodney King. Those riots happened nearly three decades after the 1965 Watts riots, which began with Marquette Frye, an African American, being pulled over for suspected drunk driving and roughed up by the police for resisting arrest.

(...) For the past five decades, the federal government has forbidden the use of racist regulations at the state and local level. Yet people of color are still more likely to be killed by the police than whites.

The *Washington Post* tracks the number of Americans killed by the police by race, gender and other characteristics. The newspaper's database indicates that 229 out of 992 of those who died that way in 2018, 23% of the total, were black, even though only about 12% of the country is African American.

Policing's institutional racism of decades and centuries ago still matters because policing culture has not changed as much as it could. For many African Americans, law enforcement represents a legacy of reinforced inequality in the justice system and resistance to advancement – even under pressure from the civil rights movement and its legacy.

In addition, the police disproportionately target black drivers.

When a Stanford University research team analyzed data collected between 2011 and 2017 from nearly 100 million traffic stops to look for evidence of systemic racial profiling, they found that black drivers were more likely to be pulled over and to have their cars searched than white drivers. They also found that the percentage of black drivers being stopped by police dropped after dark when a driver's complexion is harder to see from outside the vehicle.

This persistent disparity in policing is disappointing because of progress in other regards.

There is greater understanding within the police that brutality, particularly lethal force, leads to public mistrust, and police forces are becoming more diverse.

What's more, college students majoring in criminal justice who plan to become future law enforcement officers now frequently take "diversity in criminal justice" courses. This relatively new curriculum is designed to, among other things, make future police professionals more aware of their own biases and those of others. In my view, what these students learn in these classes will make them more attuned to the communities they serve once they enter the workforce.

In addition, law enforcement officers and leaders are being trained to recognize and minimize their own biases in New York City and other places where people of color are disproportionately stopped by the authorities and arrested.

But the persistence of racially biased policing means that unless American policing reckons with its racist roots, it is likely to keep repeating mistakes of the past. This will hinder police from fully protecting and serving the entire public.

(Source : The Conversation 25/11/2024 : <https://theconversation.com/the-racist-roots-of-american-policing-from-slave-patrols-to-traffic-stops-112816>)

Police departments are also struggling with a "historic crisis in recruiting and retaining" officers, the

Justice Department said in October. Though hiring reportedly rebounded in 2022, agencies are losing officers faster than they can replace them and total staffing is declining, according to a survey of 182 police agencies across 38 states and Washington from the Police Executive Research Forum.

More than 14,700 law enforcement agencies employed over 708,000 full-time sworn officers in 2020, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. In local police departments, about 14% of full-time sworn officers were women, 14% were Hispanic and 12% were Black. Though experts have said diversity alone is not enough to address all of the issues with policing, some research has shown that Black and Hispanic officers make fewer arrests and use force less often than their white counterparts and female officers take those enforcement actions less often than men.

Saunders co-founder and CEO of New Blue, which supports officers interested in reform, explained departments may find themselves in something of a Catch-22: they want to hire more diverse candidates, but young people of color may not want to join an organization that is and historically has been predominantly white and male.

(Source : *USA Today News* - HBCU internships, trips to Puerto Rico: How police are trying to boost diversity – 25/11/24)

#### d) Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is an academic field focused on the relationships between social conceptions of race and ethnicity, social and political laws, and media. CRT also considers racism to be systemic in various laws and rules, not based only on individuals' prejudices. The word critical in the name is an academic reference to critical theory rather than criticizing or blaming individuals.

CRT is also used in sociology to explain social, political, and legal structures and power distribution as through a "lens" focusing on the concept of race, and experiences of racism. For example, the CRT conceptual framework examines racial bias in laws and legal institutions, such as highly disparate rates of incarceration among racial groups in the United States. A key CRT concept is **intersectionality**—the way in which different forms of inequality and identity are affected by interconnections of race, class, gender, and disability. Scholars of CRT view race as a social construct with no biological basis. One tenet of CRT is that disparate racial outcomes are the result of complex, changing, and often subtle social and institutional dynamics, rather than explicit and intentional prejudices of individuals. CRT scholars argue that the social and legal construction of race advances the interests of white people at the expense of people of color, and that the liberal notion of U.S. law as "neutral" plays a significant role in maintaining a racially unjust social order, where formally color-blind laws continue to have racially discriminatory outcomes.

CRT began in the United States in the post-civil rights era, as 1960s landmark civil rights laws were being eroded and schools were being re-segregated. With racial inequalities persisting even after civil rights legislation and color-blind laws were enacted, CRT scholars in the 1970s and 1980s began reworking and expanding critical legal studies (CLS) theories on class, economic structure, and the law to examine the role of US law in perpetuating racism. CRT, a framework of analysis grounded in critical theory, originated in the mid-1970s in the writings of several American legal scholars, including Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Cheryl Harris, Charles R. Lawrence III, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia J. Williams. CRT draws from the work of thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and W. E. B. Du Bois, as well as the Black Power, Chicano, and radical feminist movements from the 1960s and 1970s.

Academic critics of CRT argue it is based on storytelling instead of evidence and reason, rejects truth and merit, and undervalues liberalism. **Since 2020, conservative US lawmakers have sought to ban or restrict the teaching of CRT in primary and secondary schools, as well as relevant training inside federal agencies.** Advocates of such bans argue that CRT is false, anti-American, villainizes white people, promotes radical leftism, and indoctrinates children. Advocates of bans on CRT have been accused of misrepresenting its tenets, and of having the goal to broadly silence

discussions of racism, equality, social justice, and the history of race.  
(Source : Wikipedia – 25/11/24)

### **e) The question of reparations**

The Native American story runs through Minnesota. The largest mass-execution in American history took place at Mankato, south-west of Minneapolis, when 38 Dakota tribesmen were hanged in 1862. Today a small memorial garden in Mankato has a bench inscribed “forgive everyone everything”. Native Americans also receive reparations. In most states they take the form of land, though it is often useless for farming or property development. But federally recognised tribes are not subject to state laws against casino gambling. So Native Americans with reservations near cities have a near monopoly over a lucrative industry. Yet gambling has been only a partial success. Native Americans still have lower life expectancy and educational attainment than any other group. The federal government has made some attempts similarly to recompense African-Americans, but these efforts were either ineffective or withdrawn after meeting too much opposition. The unpopular attempt to redistribute land in the South after the abolition of slavery was soon suspended. From the 1960s, various schemes were tried to favour minority-owned businesses in government contracting. They have not made much difference. For private businesses, reserving jobs for people of one race is illegal. Affirmative action, which gives African-Americans favourable treatment in university admissions and federal contracting, is being litigated away, mainly because it tends to discriminate against Asian-Americans.

Yet the idea of paying reparations for slavery has moved from the fringe since 1989, when John Conyers, a Michigan congressman, first introduced a reparations bill in Congress. Mr Conyers persisted in every Congress until he retired. It was not until Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote an article in the Atlantic in 2014 that the idea became more mainstream among Democrats. In the party’s 2020 primary the leading contenders all supported reparations. Since he moved into the White House, Joe Biden has announced his support for studying the issue, which looks like a case of a politician signalling support for an idea without actually having to do anything to advance it.

Even if a reparations bill passed the House, which is unlikely, it would have no chance in the Senate. The idea, which is popular among upscale Democrats, has the support of only half of African-Americans. Practical questions, such as who should receive any payment and who should be obliged to contribute, remain formidable. The political backlash against a party that made a determined push for reparations from the federal government would be fierce. This has not stopped some towns and institutions from trying. Asheville in North Carolina, Evanston in Illinois and Georgetown University have all taken steps in this direction by acknowledging a moral responsibility for slavery and segregation.

## **3. White identity**

### **a) Being white is also belonging to a race**

When it comes to their own race, white Americans divide into two tribes. As left-leaning whites become more conscious of racism, they also think more about what it means to be white. Six months after Mr Floyd’s death, 30% of whites told a poll run by Ipsos that they had “personally taken actions to understand racial issues in America”. A new university field, Critical Whiteness Studies, has sprung up to examine white guilt, white shame and white “power evasion” (the denial that they are responsible for maintaining white supremacy). Yet this way of talking has limited traction beyond left-leaning redoubts. More widespread is a feeling of some responsibility for the plight of African-Americans. Between 2014 and 2019, the share of whites who thought the government should spend more money on improving the conditions of African-Americans increased from 24% to 46%.

The second white tribe is different. Over the past decade, according to calculations by Bill Frey of the Brookings Institution, a think-tank, the number of Americans who describe themselves as

Latino or Hispanic, Asian, African- or Native American (plus those who identify as from two or more races) has risen by 53%. Over the same period America's white population grew by less than 1%. The election of Barack Obama led to an exodus of white voters away from the Democrats. Michael Tesler of the University of California, Irvine, notes : "It took the election of the first black president for some white Americans to work out that the Democratic Party is the party of non-whites," he says. By 2020 the Republican Party's lead among white men without a college degree was huge: they backed Mr Trump by a margin of 40 points.

(...) According to Ashley Jardina of Duke University, 30-40% of whites say their racial identity is "very important". This is far lower than the share of black or Hispanic Americans saying the same. But this group of race-conscious whites, who also say they have "a lot" or "a great deal" in common with other whites, numbers about 75m people of voting age. That makes them more numerous than any minority.

White racial solidarity has a murderous past. Recently it has been associated with tiki torches, neo-Nazis and the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. Yet only a tiny fraction of white Americans share such extreme views. The sense of solidarity among whites described by Ms Jardina is broader. In her book "White Identity Politics", she says that "white identity" is not a polite way of saying "dislike toward other racial or ethnic minorities". White racial consciousness comes out instead in such beliefs as the evil of reverse discrimination—whites being discriminated against because of the colour of their skin. Such views are not racist in the classic sense of white superiority. Those who hold them reject anti-black stereotypes. But they are likely to discount the effects of past racism, and to believe that African-Americans would catch up with whites if only they worked harder. Like Mr Kroll, the police-union boss, who complained that Democrats accuse those who disagree with them of being racist, or Mr Trump, who claimed to be "the least racist person anywhere in the world", many are acutely sensitive to accusations of racism.

As America becomes more multiracial, and whites lose the status of dominant group, their sense of racial solidarity may grow and the taboo against white pride may fade. A recent attempt to launch an Anglo-Saxon caucus by Republican House members could be a portent. Already many rural and suburban whites, who in Minnesota might have defined themselves as Swedes or Germans as well as Americans, define themselves as white. They, not Minnesota's African-Americans, now live in the most racially segregated places of all.

This second white tribe thinks more like a minority than part of the country's biggest single group. Geographic separation can lead to a reflexive bias that is different from racism in the 1950s but still lethal.

(source : extract from an article from *The Economist* published in 2021)

## **b) White Supremacy**

White supremacy is the belief that white people are superior to those of other races and thus should dominate them. The belief favors the maintenance and defense of any power and privilege held by white people. White supremacy has roots in the now-discredited doctrine of scientific racism and was a key justification for European colonialism.

As a political ideology, it imposes and maintain cultural, social, political, historical or institutional domination by white people and non-white supporters. In the past, this ideology had been put into effect through socioeconomic and legal structures such as the Atlantic slave trade, European colonial labor and social practices, the Scramble for Africa, Jim Crow laws in the United States, the activities of the Native Land Court in New Zealand, the White Australia policies from the 1890s to the mid-1970s, and apartheid in South Africa. This ideology is also today present among neo-Confederates.

White supremacy underlies a spectrum of contemporary movements including white nationalism, white separatism, neo-Nazism, and the Christian Identity movement. In the United States, white supremacy is primarily associated with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), Aryan Nations, and the White American Resistance movement, all of which are also considered to be antisemitic.[8] The Proud

Boys, despite claiming non-association with white supremacy, have been described in academic contexts as being such. In recent years, websites such as Twitter (known as X since July 2023), Reddit, and Stormfront, and the campaign and presidency of Donald Trump, have contributed to an increased activity and interest in white supremacy.

(Wikipedia – 25/11/24)